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Teacher communication competence: from initial education towards continuous professional development

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The paper presents the results of the research studying and monitoring the programs of developing teacher communication competence in Serbia.

Complex and various teachers' roles during their continuous professional development require highly developed communication skills.



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The effects of teacher communication competence have been studied mostly considering their transferability to students' social behavior.

High quality programs of communication competence:

- improve students' achievement and their adaptive social and emotional behavior as well as relationships among peers;
- are important in prevention (and curation) of the problems regarding students' drug addiction, highly risky sexual behavior, expressing aggression and other forms of antisocial behavior in terms of reduction and frequency/forms of behavior.



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- All these results indicate the significance of improving teachers' communication competence;
- Teachers should develop adequate social skills, modify their behavior in accordance with the broad range of communication strategies;
- Teachers should be able to understand the causes and consequences of their own communication behavior;
- They also should be able to discover and apply the most adequate forms of communication behavior and to be ready to improvise and redefine their communication action plans on the basis of new elements in variable social contexts.



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Teacher professional development as a lifelong process can be divided into three stages/periods:

- initial teacher education,
 - induction period,
 - continual professional development – teachers overcome the initial challenges of induction stage and improve their knowledge and skills.
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- Similarities and differences among the students-future teachers and active teachers are recognized in the distance toward the practice of teaching reflected on the effects of programs for communication competence development.



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- Students-future teachers are more flexible and ready to change their own behavior
- They are in the formative period for structuring the system of professional behavior
- The programs for developing their communication competence should be directed toward establishing adequate behavior



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Active teachers:

- have better understanding of their professional needs;
- are more aware of the problems occurring in communication;
- can check immediately the contents and skills they acquire within various in-service training programs and apply them directly in real pedagogic situations.

*It is necessary to include the elements of behavior correction into the programs and to create advanced courses in which their advantage of quick connecting with teaching practice would be used



Research methods and the data source

- The research is based on the analysis curricula contents/university programs and courses in Serbia
- The variables include:
 - the contents in communication education curricula (communication knowledge and communication skills);
 - the level of teacher education: pre-service and in-service teacher education.



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The following **data sources** were used:

- reports of government institutions (Ministry of education) on university education and structure of tertiary education level;
- communication curricula in pre-service teacher education at university departments and faculties for teacher education;
- university textbooks for communication curricula;
- communication curricula in in-service teacher education programs.

The sample included 31 faculties for teacher education at 7 state universities in Serbia.



Results of content analysis – review approach in education of communication competent teachers in Serbia

The courses with the communication contents are studied:

- as autonomous courses: Communicology, Communication, Communication skills, Communication psychology, Conflict resolving, Mass communication (at only seven faculties for teacher education - 21%, of 31 faculties);
- as a part of some psychological disciplines such as: Psychology of learning and teaching, Educational psychology, Social psychology, Social interaction;
- as a part of the disciplines of education science (pedagogy): Pedagogy – theory and practice of education, Didactic, Methodology of teaching, Family pedagogy, Micropedagogy, Education technology;
- as a part of other science systems and disciplines – Rhetoric, Social education (Social pedagogy), Sociology of education.



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- The programs, which improve communication competence of nowadays teachers in Serbia, are represented as programs of teacher in-service education accredited by the Ministry of Education and adequate institutions and published in the Catalogue (2002/2003- 2012/2013).
- In the first year (2002) of the accreditation of teacher in-service education courses, there were 129 accredited courses and 25% of them focused on communication competence as the main objective.
- Ten years later (2012) the status of the courses focused on the communication competence is similar – there are 22% courses focused on developing communication competence.



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- The obvious problem in communication competence education during pre-service teacher education is the lack of practicing communication skills in the classroom context;
- Several factors influencing the teachers' dissatisfaction with the realization of the offered programs in in-service education are to be emphasized: seminars held on weekends, teachers overloaded by teaching and non-teaching duties, insufficient financial stimulation, lack of financial resources, large groups of teachers attending the seminars, high number of classes during a day.



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Results of the research carried out in order to determine the teachers' experience considering learning the contents of communication competence during initial education and in-service education shows (Zlatic et al., 2013) that:

- 75% of teachers acquired the contents referring to communication competence during their underground studies, mostly integrated into other university courses;
- one third of teachers (34% of them) attended the communication contents programs during in-service education; they are satisfied with the quality of the programs since they are based on practical skills in school context;
- teachers emphasize the role of class master (82% of teachers) – communication competence is the most important for this particular role.

(The sample consisted of 230 teachers coming from different parts of Serbia. The research was carried out during 2011/2012)



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Discussion and pedagogic implications

Since the needs of students-future teachers and active teachers are different, we pointed out that:

- in pre-service teacher education it is important to develop general communication knowledge, skills, and attitudes;
- in in-service teacher education (courses for teacher professional improvement) it is important to develop special communication skills, knowledge, and attitudes in specific school and learning situations.

Some differences are necessary; they should be taken into account while creating communication competence programs.



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A creator of the program of communication competence is faced with intellectual dilemmas formative for the development of the mentioned program:

- dilemma about the relationship between theory and skills in the programs relates to the teacher's decision on what he/she will emphasize in those programs;
- dilemma about which goals have priority - process goals or product goals - puts in front of the program creator of a task to make an adequate balance between them;
- dilemma about whose goals have priority - the sender of the messages or the receivers of communication.

Practical experience in the implementation of the content is certainly the best corrective for improving programs for developing communication competence.



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Therefore, we suggest sequential development of teacher communication competence from general to specific communication behavior and activities.

A:

Development of general communication skills is a process which provides significant transfer:

- the program for developing communication competence should be based on such contents and integrated into curricula in teacher pre-service education;
- a segment of the program should be directed toward development and direct practice of skills following theoretical framework;
- it is important to offer students-future teachers the possibility and contexts to practice such skills in schools since they do not have much opportunity except attendance at demonstration classes.



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Program for developing communication competence oriented primarily to skill development should be applied in in-service education.

In induction stage, learning contexts allowing development of skills such as team work, collaborative learning, conflict resolving are the situations in school, teachers participating in professional community, intensive and permanent work with the mentor, reflexive exchange with the colleagues.

Beside teaching activities and support provided by the environment, participation in a teacher training program dealing with development of communication skills is important.



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During teachers' active performance, they should be included in in-service education programs oriented to improving communication skills in school contexts.

The most efficient way is module program realization, i.e. programs would be realized through segments which are sequenced.

Practicing situations and applying skills after each module in school context, reflexive exchange of ideas at the following meeting, and feedback obtained from colleagues and instructors allow establishing and strengthening communication skills.



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The evaluation stage in the development of communicology courses is highly significant.

The effects of communication competence programs can be measured by observing their behavior and registering the changes by:

- systematic observation of real situations,
- observation in simulated situation which are more adequate during learning process,
- by self-evaluation of features, skills, and behavior as well as by horizontal evaluation (evaluation by the partners in communication) which significantly correlate with important social outcomes of learning communication skills and behavior.



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